Friday Nights at Ichiraku

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/74660246.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/F
Fandom:	Kill la Kill (Anime & Manga)
Relationship:	Mankanshoku Mako/Matoi Ryuuko
Characters:	Mankanshoku Mako, Matoi Ryuuko, Gamagoori Ira, Jakuzure Nonon
Additional Tags:	Comedy, Humor, Ramen, Slice of Life, Yuri, Fluff
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2025-11-23 Words: 9,951 Chapters: 4/4

Friday Nights at Ichiraku

by GlowySnowy

Summary

While Ryuko is away on a two-month business trip to America with Satsuki, Mako establishes a weekly ritual: visiting the same ramen shop every friday to talk about her girlfriend.

Chapter 1

The bell above the door chimed as Mako pushed through the entrance of Ichiraku Ramen, right on schedule. It was friday evening, which meant it had been exactly one week since the last time she'd sat at this counter, in this same spot, ordering the same bowl of miso ramen she always ordered.

"Ah, Mankanshoku-san," the owner, an elderly man named Isamu-san, greeted her with a knowing smile. "Right on time, as always."

"Isamu-san!" Mako exclaimed, sliding onto her usual stool at the far end of the counter. "You know me! Punctual as a...as a...what's punctual?"

"A clock, perhaps?" he offered, already ladling broth into a bowl.

"Yes! A clock! Though actually, clocks can be slow sometimes, and then you're late for things, and then you miss the train, and then—"

"The usual?" Isamu-san interrupted gently, well-versed in Mako's tendency to spiral.

"Yes please!"

As he began preparing her ramen, Mako pulled out her phone and stared at the screen. Still no new messages. She'd checked approximately fourteen times on the train ride here, and probably another six times while walking from the station. The last message from Ryuko had come this morning—well, morning in Japan, which meant it was evening wherever she was in America.

Miss you. Satsuki's dragging me to another meeting. Kill me now.

Mako had responded immediately with approximately seventeen heart emojis and a lengthy voice message about the dream she'd had where Ryuko came home early and they went to the beach, except the beach was made of croquettes, which actually sounded amazing now that she thought about it again.

Ryuko had sent back a single emoji: 😊

That was eight hours ago.

"So," Isamu-san said, setting the steaming bowl in front of her, "how is Ryuko-san doing?"

Mako's face immediately brightened, though there was a distinct sadness in her eyes. "She's in America! With Satsuki-sama! They're doing really important business stuff. Something about international partnerships and expanding markets and—honestly, I didn't understand most of it when Ryuko-chan tried to explain it to me, but she looked very serious and official when she was packing!"

She picked up her chopsticks and poked at a piece of bamboo shoot. "They've been gone for five weeks now. Well, five weeks and three days. And...approximately eight hours."

"But who's counting?" Isamu-san said with a gentle smile.

"Exactly! Not me!" Mako said unconvincingly. She finally took a bite of noodles, chewing thoughtfully. "Do you know what the worst part is, Isamu-san?"

"Tell me."

"The time difference!" Mako gestured dramatically with her chopsticks, sending a small splash of broth onto the counter. "When I wake up, she's going to sleep! When I go to sleep, she's waking up! It's like we're living on different planets! Except we're not, we're just on different sides of the same planet, which is actually kind of romantic when you think about it, like we're always under the same sky, just at different times..."

She trailed off, staring into her bowl. "I really miss her, Isamu-san."

The old man wiped down the counter where she'd splashed, his expression sympathetic. "Of course you do. Two months is a long time to be apart from someone you love."

"One month and three weeks left," Mako said quietly. "Not that I'm counting."

She ate in silence for a moment, which was unusual enough that Isamu-san glanced at her with concern. But then she perked up again, because Mako could never stay down for long.

"But you know what? Ryuko-chan sends me pictures! Look!" She thrust her phone at him, scrolling rapidly through a gallery of photos. "That's her in front of some tall buildings in New York! And that's her looking grumpy at a fancy restaurant! Oh, and that one's my favorite—see? Satsuki-sama took it. Ryuko-chan is making a silly face because I asked her to, and she said she felt stupid doing it but she did it anyway because she loves me!"

Isamu-san studied the photo of Ryuko pulling an exaggerated expression, clearly uncomfortable but doing it nonetheless. "She seems to care about you very much."

"She does!" Mako's entire face glowed. "And I care about her! So much that sometimes my chest feels too small to hold all the feelings, like they might just burst out everywhere, and then everyone would see how much I love Ryuko-chan, which would actually be fine because I tell everyone anyway!"

She took another enthusiastic bite of ramen. "Did I tell you about the time we danced at Satsuki-sama's birthday party? Well, okay, I tell you about that every week, but it was such a good time! Everyone was watching us, and Ryuko-chan joined in even though she was embarrassed, because she didn't want me to dance alone, and that's when I knew—I mean, I already knew, but that's when I REALLY knew—that she'd always have my back, you know?"

"I do know," Isamu-san said warmly. "You've told me quite a bit about Ryuko-san over these past weeks."

"Have I?" Mako blinked. "Oh! I guess I have. Sorry if I'm annoying, Isamu-san. I just...I don't really know what to do with myself on friday nights anymore. We used to always spend fridays together. Sometimes we'd go out, sometimes we'd just stay in and watch movies, or Ryuko-chan would help me with homework even though she's not that much better at it than me..."

She smiled at the memory. "One time we tried to bake cookies together and we burned them so badly that Ryuko-chan's smoke alarm went off, and we had to wave towels at it for like ten minutes, and we were laughing so hard we could barely breathe. The cookies were completely black, like little hockey pucks, but we tried to eat them anyway and they were so bad, Isamu-san, SO bad, but it was one of the best nights ever."

"You two sound very happy together."

"We are!" Mako insisted. Then, quieter: "We will be again. When she comes home."

She pulled out her phone again, checking for messages. Still nothing new. Her shoulders drooped slightly.

"You know," Isamu-san said, "my wife and I were separated for nearly six months when we were young. I had to go work in Osaka, and she stayed here in Tokyo with her family. This was before cell phones, before video calls. We could only write letters and make expensive phone calls once a week."

Mako looked up at him with wide eyes. "That sounds really hard!"

"It was," he nodded. "But it also made us stronger. When I finally came home, I appreciated her in ways I never had before. The little things—her laugh, the way she hummed while cooking, even her complaints about my snoring. Distance teaches you what matters."

"Wow, Isamu-san, that's really deep." Mako tilted her head. "Do you still appreciate her laugh and humming?"

"Every day. She passed away three years ago, but I still hear her humming in this shop sometimes."

"Oh." Mako's eyes immediately welled up with tears. "Isamu-san, that's so sad and so beautiful at the same time! Now I'm crying in your ramen shop! This happens every week!"

He chuckled, passing her a napkin. "You're very passionate, Mankanshoku-san. Ryuko-san is lucky to have someone who feels things so deeply."

Mako dabbed at her eyes, smearing her mascara slightly. "You really think so?"

"I know so. You've been coming here every friday for a month, and every week you talk about her like she's the most important person in the world. That kind of devotion is rare."

"She IS the most important person in the world!" Mako declared, her brief sadness already transforming back into enthusiasm. "Well, okay, my family is also really important, and

you're important too, Isamu-san, and Satsuki-sama, and all our friends, but Ryuko-chan is...she's..."

She struggled for words, staring at her reflection in the broth. "She's my person, you know? Like, when something good happens, she's the first one I want to tell. When something bad happens, she's the one who makes it better. When I'm happy, she's happy. When she's sad, I want to do everything I can to make her smile. And she feels the same way about me! I know she does!"

Her phone suddenly buzzed, and Mako nearly knocked over her ramen in her haste to grab it.

"It's her! It's her!" She squealed, reading the message. Her expression softened. "She says she just got back to the hotel and she's exhausted but she wanted to say goodnight to me before I wake up. And she sent a selfie! Look, she's in pajamas! Her hair's all messy! This is the best thing that's happened all week!"

She typed back furiously, her thumbs flying across the screen.

"What are you telling her?" Isamu-san asked, amused.

"I'm telling her about the ramen! And about you! And about how I miss her! And about how I can't wait for her to come home! And—oh, I'm sending her a picture of my ramen. She always says I should eat vegetables, so I'm showing her there's vegetables in here. See? Green onions! That counts!"

She hit send, then clutched the phone to her chest dramatically. "Three more weeks, Isamu-san. Twenty-one more days. I can do this!"

"You absolutely can," he assured her.

Mako returned to her ramen with renewed vigor, slurping noodles enthusiastically. "You know what I'm going to do when she gets back? I'm going to meet her at the airport with a big sign that says 'WELCOME HOME RYUKO-CHAN I MISSED YOU MORE THAN CROQUETTES' because that's the biggest love I can express, and then I'm going to hug her so hard that she'll complain about it but I know she secretly loves it, and then we're going to go get real croquettes, and then—"

"And then?" Isamu-san prompted.

Mako's cheeks turned pink. "And then...probably a lot of kissing. Like, a lot. I've been saving up kisses for five weeks, Isamu-san. That's a lot of kisses."

"I'm sure Ryuko-san is looking forward to that."

"She better be!" Mako grinned. Then her expression turned thoughtful again. "Do you think she's lonely too? I mean, I know she has Satsuki-sama, but Satsuki-sama is...well, she's amazing, but she's not exactly the cuddly type, you know? And Ryuko-chan doesn't really talk about her feelings much, not to most people. She talks to me, though. She tells me things she doesn't tell anyone else."

"That's what love is," Isamu-san said simply. "Finding someone you can be yourself with, completely and honestly."

"Yeah," Mako agreed softly. "Yeah, exactly."

She finished her ramen, scraping the bowl clean as she always did. Isamu-san had learned early on that Mako appreciated her food enthusiastically and never left a drop.

"Same time next week?" he asked as she paid.

"Definitely! I'll be here every friday until Ryuko-chan comes home! And then—" she brightened, "and then maybe I'll bring her here! She'd love your ramen, Isamu-san! Although she might be grumpy about it at first because she's always grumpy about new things, but then she'd try it and her eyes would get all wide and she'd try to act like it's not that good but I'd know she loved it!"

"I'd be honored to meet her."

Mako beamed at him, then glanced at her phone one more time. Ryuko had responded to her messages with a simple: *Glad you're eating. Miss your face. Sleep well.*

"She misses my face!" Mako announced to the entire shop. "My face! That's so romantic!"

As she headed for the door, Isamu-san called after her: "Mankanshoku-san?"

"Yes?"

"Three weeks will pass faster than you think. Before you know it, you'll be at that airport with your sign."

Mako's smile was brilliant. "I know! And I'm going to make it the best sign anyone has ever seen! Maybe I'll add glitter! Ryuko-chan says she doesn't like glitter, but secretly I think she does!"

The bell chimed as she left, and Isamu-san smiled to himself as he cleaned her bowl. He'd see her again next friday, same time, same stool, same order.

He hoped Ryuko knew how lucky she was. Something told him she did.

Chapter 2

The bell above the door chimed at precisely 6:48 PM the following friday, three minutes earlier than usual. Isamu-san looked up from wiping down the counter, ready to greet his regular customer—and then his eyes widened. The doorway was completely filled. Not by Mako, who was indeed there, but by an absolutely massive man who had to duck down and turn sideways just to squeeze through the entrance. Even then, his shoulders barely made it through. He straightened up once inside, and his head nearly brushed the ceiling.

"Isamu-san!" Mako chirped, waving enthusiastically. "I brought a friend! This is Gamagoori Ira! He's one of Satsuki-sama's Elite Four! Well, former Elite Four, since Honnouji Academy doesn't exist anymore, but he's still elite in my heart!"

"Good evening," Gamagoori said in a deep, formal voice, bowing as much as the ceiling would allow. "I apologize for my... stature. I hope I am not causing an inconvenience."

Isamu-san, who had seen many things in his seventy-three years but never quite a customer of this magnitude, recovered quickly. "Not at all! Welcome to Ichiraku. Please, sit wherever you're... comfortable."

Gamagoori surveyed the shop with a critical eye, clearly calculating which seat would be structurally sound enough to support him. The regular stools were immediately out of the question. Eventually, he settled for standing at the end of the counter, which actually seemed more comfortable for him anyway.

Mako bounced onto her usual stool, already pulling out her phone to check for messages. "Gamagoori and I were just at the library! I was helping him reorganize the community center's volunteer schedule, except I kind of made it more confusing, so really he was helping me fix what I messed up, but he was very nice about it!"

"Mankanshoku's enthusiasm is... invaluable," Gamagoori said carefully. "Her organizational methods are simply... unique."

"I organized it by color!" Mako explained proudly. "All the Monday activities were red, Tuesdays were orange, Wednesdays were yellow—"

"The issue being that one cannot determine the day of an activity simply by looking at the schedule without a color-coded legend, which was not included," Gamagoori added, though his tone was fond rather than critical.

"Oh yeah! I forgot that part!" Mako giggled. "Anyway, I was telling Gamagoori about this place and how you make the best ramen and how you listen to me talk about Ryuko-chan every week, and he said he's never been here before, which is crazy because it's the best, so I said he had to come with me!"

Isamu-san smiled, setting out menus. "I'm honored. What can I get for you both?"

"The usual for me!" Mako said immediately.

Gamagoori studied the menu with intense concentration, as if it were a military strategic document. "I will have... the shoyu ramen. With extra vegetables. And perhaps a side of gyoza, if it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all."

As Isamu-san began preparing their food, Mako swiveled on her stool to face Gamagoori. "Guess how many days until Ryuko-chan comes home?"

"Fourteen," Gamagoori answered immediately.

"Fourteen!" Mako confirmed, holding up both hands with fingers splayed. "Two weeks! That's basically nothing! Well, it's not nothing, it's two weeks, which is still a lot of hours, but it's less than it was!"

She turned back to Isamu-san. "Gamagoori is really good with numbers and schedules and remembering things! Unlike me, who forgot what day my dentist appointment was last month and showed up on the wrong day, and then had to reschedule, but then I forgot to write down the new day—"

"I have since added the appointment to your phone calendar," Gamagoori interjected. "With three separate reminders."

"See? He's the best!" Mako beamed at him, then her expression shifted to something more contemplative. "Gamagoori actually understands about missing people. His family is really far away, and he doesn't get to see them very often because he's always doing volunteer work and community service stuff."

"It is a sacrifice I make willingly," Gamagoori said. "Though I admit, there are times when the distance is... difficult."

"Exactly!" Mako pointed at him enthusiastically. "That's exactly how I feel! It's like, I know Ryuko-chan is doing important things, and I'm proud of her, and I want her to have these experiences, but also..." Her voice got smaller. "I just really want her to be here."
Isamu-san set their bowls down, and Mako stared into her ramen for a moment before speaking again.

"I had a really bad day on Tuesday," she admitted quietly. "I failed a test that I actually studied for—well, I studied a little bit—and then I tripped going up the stairs at school and everyone saw, and then I got home and I just really, really wanted to call Ryuko-chan and hear her voice. But it was the middle of the night for her, and I didn't want to wake her up because Satsuki-sama says they've been working really hard and Ryuko-chan needs her sleep."

She picked up her chopsticks but didn't eat yet. "So I texted her instead, but I couldn't really explain how I felt in a text, you know? And she didn't respond until the next morning—well,

her morning—and she said she was sorry I had a bad day and that she loved me, but it wasn't the same as having her there."

Gamagoori was quiet for a moment, then spoke in his measured way: "When I first left home to attend Honnouji Academy, I experienced similar feelings. The discipline and structure helped, but there were nights when I simply wished to hear my mother's voice, or my father's counsel. Communication across distance is a poor substitute for presence."

"Yes!" Mako looked up at him. "That's exactly it! Like, I love getting her texts and pictures, and we video call when we can, but it's all just... reminding me that she's not actually here. Sometimes I think it might be easier if we just didn't talk until she got back, but then I think about not talking to her for two weeks and that seems impossible."

"It is a paradox," Gamagoori agreed. "Contact emphasizes absence, yet absence without contact is unbearable."

Isamu-san set down Gamagoori's gyoza. "You're both very wise for your age."

"I'm not wise!" Mako protested. "I'm just sad! Well, not sad exactly. More like... incomplete? Like there's a Mako-shaped person here eating ramen, but there's a piece missing, and that piece is somewhere in America probably also eating something but wishing she was eating it with me."

She finally took a bite of noodles, chewing thoughtfully. "Do you think Ryuko-chan talks about me to Satsuki-sama the way I talk about her to you, Isamu-san?"

"I couldn't say for certain, but given what you've told me about your relationship, I imagine she does."

"Lady Satsuki mentioned that Ryuko speaks of you frequently," Gamagoori offered. "She relayed this information to me when I inquired about their trip last week. Apparently Ryuko has been quite... vocal about her eagerness to return home."

Mako's entire face lit up. "Really? She talks about me? What does she say? Does she say she misses me? Does she show Satsuki-sama pictures of me? Oh! Does she complain about how long the trip is because she just wants to come home and—"

"I do not know the specific contents of their conversations," Gamagoori interrupted gently. "Lady Satsuki is not one to gossip. But she did mention that Ryuko's mood has been increasingly... restless. I believe the word she used was 'insufferable.'"

"That sounds like Ryuko-chan when she misses me!" Mako said proudly, as if this were a compliment. "She gets all grumpy and irritable! It's actually kind of cute. Don't tell her I said that though, she hates being called cute."

She pulled out her phone again, checking it for what was probably the hundredth time that day. Still no new messages since this morning, when Ryuko had sent a blurry selfie with the caption: *Coffee is not a personality trait but it's all I have right now.*

Mako had responded with: *You have me too! I'm a personality trait! The best one!*

"You check your phone quite frequently," Gamagoori observed.

"Every seven minutes on average," Mako confirmed. "I counted! Well, Ryuko-chan counted for me once. She said I was going to wear out my screen. But I can't help it! What if she sends something important and I miss it?"

"What would constitute 'something important' that could not wait seven minutes?"

Mako considered this. "What if she says she loves me? I need to say it back immediately! Or what if she's having a bad day and needs me to send her a funny picture? Or what if—oh! What if she's decided to come home early and she's surprising me?"

"That seems unlikely given the nature of their business commitments," Gamagoori said.

"But not impossible!" Mako insisted. "Unlikely and impossible are different things! Isamu-san, they're different, right?"

"They are indeed," Isamu-san confirmed, amused.

Mako nodded triumphantly, then turned to Gamagoori. "That's why I have to keep checking. Because of the difference between unlikely and impossible."

They ate in companionable silence for a few minutes. Well, Mako's silence lasted about forty-five seconds before she started talking again.

"Gamagoori, can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"How do you do it? The long-distance thing with your family? Like, how do you deal with missing them all the time?"

Gamagoori set down his chopsticks, considering the question with the same seriousness he brought to everything. "I suppose I have learned to find purpose in the separation. I am away from my family so that I may serve my community, which is a goal my parents instilled in me. The distance is meaningful because it represents a sacrifice made in service of something larger than myself."

He paused. "But I would be dishonest if I said it was easy. There are times when duty feels like poor compensation for presence. I believe that is simply the nature of loving people—you must sometimes endure their absence, and trust that the connection will endure regardless of distance."

"Wow," Mako said softly. "That's really beautiful, Gamagoori. You should write fortune cookies."

Despite himself, Gamagoori's lips twitched in what might have been the beginnings of a smile. "I will take that under advisement."

Mako finished her ramen and immediately pulled out her phone again. This time, there was a message waiting.

Tried to order ramen here. It was bad. I miss Mako's recommendations. I miss Mako.

She showed the message to both Isamu-san and Gamagoori, her eyes shining. "She misses me! And my ramen recommendations! That's basically the same as saying she wants to marry me, right?"

"I... do not believe those two things are equivalent," Gamagoori said carefully.

"They are in my heart!" Mako clutched her phone to her chest. "Oh, Isamu-san, when she comes back I'm definitely bringing her here. She needs to try real ramen again after suffering through bad American ramen. That's true love, you know—suffering through bad ramen because you're away from your girlfriend!"

She typed back furiously: When you get home, we're going to Isamu-san's shop and you're going to have the best ramen of your LIFE and I'm going to watch you eat it and it's going to be SO ROMANTIC!

"I'm not sure ramen consumption is typically considered romantic," Gamagoori ventured.

"Everything is romantic when you're in love!" Mako declared. "Eating ramen together? Romantic. Doing laundry together? Romantic. Arguing about whether a hot dog is a sandwich? Super romantic, and also Ryuko-chan is wrong, it's obviously a sandwich!"

"A hot dog is a taco," Isamu-san said mildly.

Mako gasped. "Isamu-san, NO! We can't have this discussion right now, my heart can't take it!"

Gamagoori looked between them, clearly uncertain whether he should weigh in on this debate. Wisely, he chose to return to his gyoza.

Mako's phone buzzed again: *It's a date. Two weeks. Mark your calendar.*

"She said it's a date!" Mako squealed, showing them the screen. "A date! At two weeks! Which I already had marked on my calendar anyway, but now it's OFFICIAL!"

She spun on her stool, facing Gamagoori again. "Thank you for coming with me tonight. I know I'm a lot when I talk about Ryuko-chan, and most people get kind of tired of hearing about her, but you listened and you shared stuff about your family and you didn't tell me I was being silly for missing her so much."

"You are not being silly," Gamagoori said firmly. "Your feelings are valid, and the strength of your devotion is admirable. Ryuko is fortunate to have someone who cares so deeply."

"We're both fortunate!" Mako corrected. "She cares about me just as much! She just shows it differently. Like, she doesn't talk about her feelings a lot, but she does things, you know? She remembers how I like my tea. She makes sure I eat vegetables even though I always

complain. She lets me put my cold feet on her legs when we're watching TV even though she hates it."

Her expression softened. "And she texts me every single day, even when she's exhausted and busy and probably has a million important things to do. Every day, Gamagoori. Sometimes it's just a heart emoji or a picture of something random, but every day she makes sure I know she's thinking about me."

"That is indeed love," Isamu-san said quietly.

They finished their meal, and when the check came, Gamagoori insisted on paying for both of them despite Mako's protests.

"You assisted me with the volunteer schedule today," he said. "And more importantly, you have taught me something valuable about enduring separation from loved ones. This is a small repayment."

"What did I teach you?" Mako asked, genuinely curious.

"That it is acceptable to struggle with distance. I have always viewed my separation from my family as a duty to be borne stoically, without complaint. But watching you express your feelings so openly, without shame... it is a reminder that strength and vulnerability are not mutually exclusive."

Mako blinked, then promptly burst into tears. "Gamagoori, that's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me! Well, except for all the nice things Ryuko-chan says, but those are in a different category!"

She threw her arms around him in a hug, or at least hugged as much of him as she could reach, which was approximately his midsection. Gamagoori looked briefly startled but patted her head awkwardly.

"There, there. Please do not cry in the ramen shop."

"Too late!" Mako sobbed. "I'm already crying! This happens every week! Ask Isamu-san!"

"It's true," Isamu-san confirmed, handing her a napkin. "Very punctual about it."

As they prepared to leave—Gamagoori having to execute the same complex maneuvering to fit through the door in reverse—Mako turned back to Isamu-san.

"Same time next week?"

"I'll be here. Will you be bringing Gamagoori again?"

"Maybe! Or maybe I'll bring someone else! I'm introducing everyone to this place eventually. And in two weeks..." She grinned. "In two weeks, I'm bringing Ryuko-chan."

"I look forward to it," Isamu-san said warmly.

Outside, as they walked toward the station, Gamagoori spoke: "Thank you for inviting me this evening, Mankanshoku. It was... unexpectedly meaningful."

"Of course! We're friends, Gamagoori! Friends share their favorite ramen places and their feelings about missing people!" She grabbed his hand—or rather, a few of his fingers, which was all she could manage—and squeezed. "And in two weeks, when Ryuko-chan is home, we should all hang out together! You and me and Ryuko-chan and everyone! We can have a welcome home party!"

"Lady Satsuki would likely appreciate that as well."

"Yes! A party! With ramen!" Mako's eyes went wide. "Gamagoori, what if we have the party AT the ramen shop? Do you think Isamu-san would let us?"

"The shop is quite small, and given the size of our friend group—"

"Details!" Mako waved this away. "We'll figure it out! The important thing is that in two weeks, Ryuko-chan will be home, and everything will be right again!"

She pulled out her phone one more time, checking for messages. There was one new one, sent just moments ago:

Can't sleep. Thinking about you. 14 more days is too many.

Mako's smile could have lit up the entire street.

"Actually," she said softly, "everything's going to be perfect."

Chapter 3

The bell chimed at 6:44 PM, and this time Isamu-san was prepared for the possibility of another guest. He was not, however, prepared for the pink-haired girl who strutted in behind Mako with the air of someone who had opinions about everything and wasn't afraid to share them.

"This is the place?" Nonon Jakuzure asked, surveying the small shop with a critical eye. "It's kind of... cozy. And by cozy I mean tiny."

"Nonon!" Mako scolded, though she was smiling. "Don't be rude! This is the best ramen shop in all of Tokyo! Maybe all of Japan! Maybe the world!"

"I haven't been to every ramen shop in the world, so I couldn't possibly confirm that," Nonon said, but she was already sliding onto a stool next to Mako's usual spot. "But fine, I'll give it a shot. You've been going on about this place all week."

"That's because it's amazing!" Mako settled onto her regular stool, already pulling out her phone. "Isamu-san, this is Nonon Jakuzure! She was also one of the Elite Four! She conducts music and she's really talented but don't tell her I said that because her head is already big enough—ow!"

Nonon had flicked her ear. "I can hear you, you know. And my head is perfectly proportioned, thank you very much."

Isamu-san smiled, setting out menus. "Welcome, Jakuzure-san. Any friend of Mankanshoku-san is welcome here."

"We're not friends," Nonon said automatically. Then, catching Mako's hurt expression, she sighed. "We're... associates. Fine, friends. Whatever."

"We're friends!" Mako declared, throwing her arms around Nonon, who tried to push her off but was clearly not trying very hard.

"Get off me, you're crushing my jacket—okay, fine, yes, we're friends. Happy?"

"Very!" Mako released her and beamed at Isamu-san. "Nonon pretends to be all tough and mean, but she's actually really nice! She helped me pick out my outfit for when I meet Ryuko-chan at the airport! Well, she told me everything I chose was wrong and then picked out something completely different, but that's basically the same as helping!"

"Nothing you chose matched," Nonon said, studying the menu. "You can't wear a red shirt with pink pants, Mako. That's not fashion, that's a crime."

"But they're both warm colors!"

"That's not how it works." Nonon looked up at Isamu-san. "I'll have the tonkotsu ramen. Extra firm on the noodles. And green tea."

"The usual for me!" Mako added.

As Isamu-san began preparing their order, Mako turned to Nonon with sudden intensity. "Guess how many days until Ryuko-chan comes home?"

"Seven," Nonon answered immediately. "You've mentioned it approximately forty-seven times since we left school."

"Seven days!" Mako held up seven fingers, just to be sure. "That's one week! That's barely any time at all! Well, it's still a lot of hours, and a lot of minutes, and SO many seconds, but it's the smallest number of weeks it can be!"

She spun on her stool to face Nonon more directly. "Aren't you excited? Satsuki-sama is coming back too! You must be excited!"

Nonon's expression flickered with something complex before settling back into her usual practiced nonchalance. "I mean, sure. It'll be good to have Satsuki back. The others have been completely lost without her organizational skills. Gamagoori tried to schedule last week's volunteer meeting and somehow double-booked the community center with a children's birthday party."

"But aren't you excited excited?" Mako pressed. "Like, excited in your heart? The way I'm excited for Ryuko-chan?"

"That's different," Nonon said quickly. Too quickly.

Mako tilted her head, studying her. "Is it though?"

"Yes! Obviously! You and Ryuko are—" Nonon gestured vaguely, "—you know. Together. Dating. Girlfriends. Whatever you want to call it. Satsuki and I are... we're friends. Childhood friends. That's completely different."

"Uh-huh," Mako said, in a tone that suggested she was not convinced.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing!" Mako's smile was innocent. Too innocent. "Just that you talk about Satsuki-sama a lot. Like, a LOT a lot. Almost as much as I talk about Ryuko-chan!"

"I do not—"

"You do though," Isamu-san interjected mildly, setting down their ramen. "In the past ten minutes, you've mentioned her three times."

Nonon's face flushed pink, nearly matching her hair. "That's—I was just—she's relevant to the conversation! Mako brought her up first!"

"And at school today," Mako continued, picking up her chopsticks, "when Uzu mentioned he might visit Osaka next month, you immediately said 'Oh, Satsuki loves Osaka, she went there last spring and told me about this amazing okonomiyaki place,' and then you told him the exact address even though nobody asked."

"I was being helpful!"

"And yesterday, when we were studying—well, when you were studying and I was mostly doodling—you checked your phone like every five minutes."

"I was not—"

"You were," Mako said gently. "I counted. Well, I counted to twelve and then I lost track, but it was a lot. And every time you checked it, you got this little disappointed look, like you were hoping for a message that wasn't there."

Nonon was quiet for a long moment, staring into her ramen. "Fine. Maybe I miss her a little. We've known each other since we were kids. Of course I miss her when she's gone for two months. That's normal. That's what friends do."

"Is it the same kind of missing as friend-missing though?" Mako asked, taking a bite of noodles. "Or is it the other kind?"

"What other kind?"

"The kind where your chest feels too small for all the feelings, and you think about them first thing when you wake up and last thing before you sleep, and everything reminds you of them, even random stuff that doesn't make sense, like how I saw a really grumpy-looking cat yesterday and immediately thought of Ryuko-chan—"

"The cat was grumpy and you thought of Ryuko? That's kind of insulting," Nonon pointed out.

"She'd agree with it though!" Mako grinned. "Ryuko-chan knows she's grumpy! It's part of her charm! Anyway, my point is—do you miss Satsuki-sama like that? The big kind of missing?"

Nonon was very quiet, moving her chopsticks through her ramen without eating. When she finally spoke, her voice was smaller than usual.

"I've been in love with Satsuki since I was eight years old."

Mako gasped so loudly that an elderly couple at the other end of the shop looked over in concern.

"I knew it!" Mako pointed at her triumphantly. "I KNEW it! Didn't I tell you, Isamu-san? I told Gamagoori last week too, I said—"

"Okay, yes, you're very perceptive, congratulations," Nonon cut her off, her face now fully crimson. "Can we please not make a big thing about this?"

"But it IS a big thing!" Mako insisted. "You love Satsuki-sama! That's huge! That's enormous! That's—wait." Her expression shifted to concern. "Does Satsuki-sama know?"

"No," Nonon said flatly. "And she's not going to know. Ever. So whatever you're thinking, stop thinking it."

"But why not? If you love her, you should tell her! I told Ryuko-chan, and now we're together and it's the best thing ever!"

"That's different," Nonon said again, taking an aggressive bite of noodles. "Ryuko liked you back. Obviously. Anyone with eyes could see that. Satsuki..." She trailed off, staring at the counter. "Satsuki doesn't think of me that way. She never has."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've known her for fifteen years, Mako. I know how she looks at things she wants. I know the tone her voice gets when she's interested in something. And she's never looked at me like that. Never used that tone with me. I'm her friend. Her oldest friend. And that's... that's enough."

Mako was quiet for a moment, which was unusual enough that Isamu-san glanced at her with concern. But then she spoke, her voice uncharacteristically serious.

"When Ryuko-chan and I got together, you know what she told me? She said she'd had feelings for me for a while but she didn't think I meant my feelings seriously. She thought maybe I was just being friendly, or enthusiastic, or that I didn't really understand what I was feeling. She almost didn't say anything because she was so sure I'd tell her she was wrong."

"Okay, but—"

"I'm not finished!" Mako said firmly. "My point is, Ryuko-chan was wrong. She was so worried about what she thought I felt that she almost missed what I actually felt. And maybe —just maybe—you're doing the same thing with Satsuki-sama."

"It's not the same," Nonon insisted, but her voice wavered slightly.

"Have you ever told her how you feel? Even a little bit?"

"Of course not. Why would I risk fifteen years of friendship for something that's never going to happen?"

"But what if it could happen?" Mako leaned closer. "What if Satsuki-sama is waiting for you to say something? What if she thinks you're not interested?"

"Satsuki doesn't wait for anyone to say anything," Nonon said. "If she wanted me, she'd tell me. That's who she is. Direct. Honest. She doesn't play games."

"Unless she's scared," Mako said quietly.

Nonon laughed, but it sounded hollow. "Satsuki Kiryuin isn't scared of anything."

"Everyone's scared of something," Isamu-san interjected softly. "Especially when it comes to matters of the heart. The stronger the person, the more they fear vulnerability."

Nonon looked at him, then back at her ramen. "Even if—and I'm not saying you're right—but even if there was a chance, which there isn't, what would I even say? 'Hey Satsuki, I've been in love with you for a decade and a half, just thought you should know?' That's not weird at all."

"Yes!" Mako said enthusiastically. "Exactly that!"

"I was being sarcastic!"

"I know, but it's still a good idea!" Mako grabbed Nonon's hand. "Look, I know it's scary. When I kissed Ryuko-chan that second time—the one on the roof after everything—I was SO scared. Like, my heart was beating so hard I thought it might explode. But I did it anyway because I couldn't NOT do it, you know? Sometimes you just have to be brave even when you're terrified."

"You and I have very different definitions of brave," Nonon muttered, but she didn't pull her hand away.

"When does Satsuki-sama get back?" Mako asked. "The same day as Ryuko-chan, right?"

"Yeah. Next friday. Evening flight."

"So you have seven days to figure out what you want to say."

"I'm not going to—"

"Seven days to practice!" Mako continued as if Nonon hadn't spoken. "And I can help! We can rehearse! I'll pretend to be Satsuki-sama, and you can practice confessing your feelings!"

"Absolutely not."

"Come on! It'll be fun!"

"Nothing about that sounds fun. That sounds like torture."

"Isamu-san, tell her it's a good idea!"

Isamu-san raised his hands peacefully. "I think this is a decision only Jakuzure-san can make for herself. But I will say this—regret is a heavy burden to carry. Heavier than rejection, in many ways. At least rejection gives you an answer."

Nonon stared at him. "That's not comforting at all."

"I'm not trying to comfort you. I'm trying to give you something to think about."

They ate in silence for a few minutes. Mako kept glancing at Nonon, clearly wanting to say more but exercising unusual restraint. Finally, Nonon sighed.

"Fine. Let's say—hypothetically—that I was going to tell her something. Not a full confession, just... something. What would I even say?"

Mako's face lit up like Christmas. "Okay! So first, you need to pick the right moment. It should be private, but not too private, because that's intimidating. And maybe somewhere meaningful to both of you? Like a place you both like?"

"The music room at the old academy site," Nonon said without thinking. Then, realizing what she'd admitted, added quickly, "Hypothetically."

"Perfect! So you'd take her there, and then you'd—"

"The academy is demolished, Mako."

"Oh. Right." Mako thought for a moment. "Okay, somewhere else meaningful then. Where did you two meet?"

"The Kiryuin estate. We were eight. I was there for a playdate arranged by our families. We also saw eachother at kindergarden."

"And what happened?"

Nonon's expression softened despite herself. "She challenged me to a race around the garden. I won, barely. She demanded a rematch immediately. Said nobody beat her at anything. We raced seven more times. She won the last one."

"That's so cute!" Mako squealed. "You should tell her that! Remind her of when you first met, and then tell her how much she's meant to you since then, and then—"

"And then I'll die of embarrassment. Great plan."

"You won't die! You'll feel so much better! Trust me, keeping feelings inside is the worst. It's like..." Mako gestured dramatically with her chopsticks, "it's like trying to keep a really fizzy soda from exploding! Eventually it's just going to burst everywhere anyway, so you might as well open it carefully on purpose!"

"That's a terrible metaphor."

"But it's true though!"

Nonon ate another bite of ramen, then set down her chopsticks. "Can I ask you something? And I want you to be honest."

"Always!" Mako said.

"Do you really think I have a chance? Or are you just being optimistic because that's who you are?"

Mako looked at her seriously. "I think Satsuki-sama cares about you a lot. Like, a LOT. I see the way she looks at you when you're not paying attention. And the way she always makes

sure you're included in things, even when she's busy with other stuff. And remember when you were telling that story about the marching band, she was smiling the whole time. Not her polite smile—her real smile. The one that makes her eyes crinkle a little."

"She smiles like that at everyone she cares about," Nonon said, but there was hope creeping into her voice despite herself.

"Maybe," Mako allowed. "But I think you're different. I think you've always been different to her. You just have to let her know that she's different to you too."

Nonon picked up her tea, holding the cup in both hands. "I'll... think about it. That's all I'm promising. I'll think about it."

"That's all I'm asking!" Mako grinned. "Well, actually I'm asking for more than that, but I'll take thinking about it as a start!"

They finished their ramen, and when the check came, Nonon pulled out her wallet before Mako could protest.

"I'm paying," she said firmly. "Don't argue."

"I wasn't going to! Thank you, Nonon!"

"Yeah, well. Consider it payment for..." She gestured vaguely. "This. Whatever this was. Therapy? Emotional support? Free terrible advice?"

"It's not terrible advice!" Mako protested. "It's great advice! The best advice! Tell her, Isamu-san!"

"I think," Isamu-san said diplomatically, "that the advice is sound, even if acting on it requires courage."

"See?" Mako turned back to Nonon. "Courage! You have courage! You were in the Elite Four! You fought in battles! You can definitely tell one girl that you like her!"

"Love," Nonon corrected quietly. "Not like. Love."

"Even better!" Mako grabbed her hands across the counter. "Love is the best thing ever, Nonon! And in seven days, you'll have your chance! Just like I'll have my chance to see Ryuko-chan again! We're both waiting for our people to come home!"

"It's not the same—" Nonon started, then stopped. "Actually, maybe it is. A little. Maybe I get it now. Why you come here every week. Why you need to talk about it."

"Because keeping it inside is too hard?" Mako suggested.

"Yeah," Nonon admitted. "Because keeping it inside is too hard."

As they stood to leave, Mako pulled out her phone one more time. There was a message from Ryuko:

One week. Can't wait to see your face. Love you.

"She loves me," Mako whispered, showing Nonon the screen. "She says it and I still can't believe it sometimes."

Nonon looked at the message, then at Mako's radiant expression. "You're really lucky, you know that?"

"I know," Mako said seriously. "But you could be lucky too, Nonon. You just have to be brave enough to try."

Outside, as they walked toward the station, Nonon spoke: "If I do this—and I'm not saying I will—but if I do, and it goes horribly wrong, and she never wants to speak to me again, can I come here and cry to Isamu-san like you do?"

"Of course!" Mako linked her arm through Nonon's. "But it's not going to go horribly wrong. It's going to go perfectly. I can feel it!"

"Your feelings aren't exactly reliable, Mako."

"They are about this!" Mako insisted. "Trust me! In seven days, both of us are going to be so happy! You'll see!"

Nonon didn't respond, but as they boarded the train, Mako noticed her pull out her phone and stare at a message thread labeled "Satsuki." She watched her type something, delete it, type something else, delete that too, and finally put the phone away with a frustrated sigh.

"Seven days," Mako reminded her gently.

"Seven days," Nonon echoed.

Chapter 4

Saturday evening, 7:23 PM. Isamu-san was beginning to think Mako wasn't coming this week. Friday had passed without her usual arrival, and he'd found himself oddly disappointed. He'd even prepared extra miso broth, just in case.

But then the bell chimed, and there she was—practically glowing, her hand firmly clasped with another girl's. A girl with short dark hair, striking blue eyes, and an expression that could only be described as pleasantly exhausted.

"Isamu-san!" Mako burst through the door, dragging her companion behind her. "I'm sorry I didn't come yesterday! We were—um—we were—"

"Busy," the dark-haired girl cut in, her face flushing slightly. "We were busy."

"Very busy!" Mako agreed enthusiastically, then giggled in a way that made it extremely clear what kind of "busy" they'd been. "But I'm here now! And I brought Ryuko-chan! Isamu-san, this is Ryuko! Ryuko-chan, this is Isamu-san!"

Ryuko gave a small, awkward wave. "Hey. Sorry for, uh... keeping her from her friday tradition."

"No apology necessary," Isamu-san said warmly, unable to suppress his smile. This was the girl Mako had talked about for seven weeks straight. He could immediately see why. Despite her gruff exterior, the way she looked at Mako—like she was the most precious thing in the world—was unmistakable. "I'm very glad to finally meet you, Ryuko-san. Please, sit."

They took stools next to each other, Mako practically vibrating with excitement. She hadn't let go of Ryuko's hand.

"Ryuko-chan got back friday evening and I met her at the airport with my sign—I added glitter like I said I would, and she pretended to hate it but I know she loved it—and then we went back to her place and we—"

"Mako," Ryuko interrupted, her face now completely red. "He doesn't need a play-by-play."

"I wasn't going to give details!" Mako protested. "I was just going to say we spent a lot of quality time together!"

"That's still—you're still—" Ryuko covered her face with her free hand. "Oh my god."

Isamu-san chuckled. "I take it the reunion went well?"

"It was perfect," Mako sighed dreamily. "Everything I imagined and more. Ryuko-chan tried to act all cool at the airport but then she saw me and her face did this thing—"

"What thing?" Ryuko asked suspiciously.

"This thing where it got all soft and her eyes got shiny and I know you were trying not to cry —"

"I wasn't crying!"

"You were a little bit crying!" Mako insisted. "And it was beautiful! And then you picked me up and spun me around even though I know your back was probably hurting from the long flight—"

"It wasn't—"

"—and then you kissed me right there in front of everyone, and you didn't even care who was watching, and I thought my heart was going to explode from happiness!"

Ryuko was now hiding her face completely, but Isamu-san could see the smile creeping around the edges of her hands. "Can we order food now? Please?"

"Yes!" Mako turned to Isamu-san. "The usual for me! And Ryuko-chan will have... what do you want, Ryuko-chan?"

Ryuko lowered her hands, studying the menu. "The tonkotsu looks good. And some gyoza."

"Excellent choices," Isamu-san said, already moving to prepare their order. "So, Ryuko-san, how was America?"

Ryuko groaned. "Long. Boring. Full of meetings that could've been emails. Satsuki dragged me to approximately seven thousand business dinners where I had to pretend I understood what anyone was talking about."

"She was very good at it though!" Mako said proudly. "She sent me pictures and she looked so professional and mature! Like a real businesswoman!"

"I felt like a fraud the entire time," Ryuko admitted. "But yeah, it wasn't all bad. Got to see some cool places. The ramen sucked though. Everywhere. Nothing compared to—" She gestured around the shop. "Well, Mako's been talking about this place for weeks, so I'm hoping it lives up to the hype."

"No pressure," Isamu-san said mildly.

"It will!" Mako assured her. "It's the best! I've been coming here every friday for—wait, how many weeks?"

"Seven," Isamu-san and Ryuko said simultaneously, then looked at each other in amusement.

"She told you?" Ryuko asked.

"Extensively. Every week. In great detail."

Ryuko turned to Mako with a raised eyebrow. "What kind of details?"

"Just... stuff!" Mako said innocently. "Like how much I missed you, and what you were doing, and how many days until you came home, and that time I sent you a picture of a grumpy cat that reminded me of you—"

"You told him about the cat?"

"I told him about everything! That's what you do at ramen shops! You talk about your feelings and the people you love!"

Ryuko shook her head, but she was smiling. "You're ridiculous."

"You love it though."

"Yeah," Ryuko said softly, squeezing her hand. "I really do."

Isamu-san set their bowls down, and Ryuko immediately picked up her chopsticks, taking a careful first bite. Her eyes widened.

"Holy shit," she muttered.

"Language!" Mako said automatically, then: "But also yes, right? It's amazing, right?"

"It's..." Ryuko took another bite, then another. "Okay, you weren't exaggerating. This is incredible."

"I told you!" Mako beamed at Isamu-san. "I told her it was the best!"

They ate in comfortable silence for a few moments, and Isamu-san found himself watching them with fondness. The way Ryuko unconsciously leaned toward Mako. The way Mako kept glancing at her as if making sure she was really there. The way their feet tangled together under the counter.

"So," Isamu-san said, "I take it Satsuki-san also returned safely?"

"Oh!" Mako nearly dropped her chopsticks. "Yes! And Isamu-san, you won't believe what happened! Well, actually you probably will believe it because you're very wise, but still—Nonon did it! She confessed!"

Ryuko snorted into her ramen. "If that's what you want to call it."

"What do you mean?" Isamu-san asked, curious.

"Okay, so," Mako set down her chopsticks, ready to tell the story properly. "Friday night, after Ryuko-chan and I had our... reunion—"

"Still not calling it that," Ryuko muttered.

"—we got a phone call from Gamagoori. Well, Ryuko-chan got the call. And he was like 'you need to come to the Kiryuin estate immediately, there's a situation.'"

"He actually said 'situation,'" Ryuko added. "In that serious voice he does. I thought someone died."

"So we got dressed—well, we got dressed again—"

"Mako!"

"—and we rushed over there, and when we got there, the whole group was in the sitting room, and Satsuki was sitting very straight on the couch looking confused, and Nonon was pacing back and forth like she was going to wear a hole in the carpet!"

Ryuko picked up the story. "Apparently, Nonon had shown up about an hour earlier and asked to speak to Satsuki privately. And then she just... word-vomited. Like, fifteen years of feelings all at once."

"She told her everything!" Mako said dramatically. "About being in love with her since they were kids, and about how she's been too scared to say anything, and about how she knows Satsuki probably doesn't feel the same way but she couldn't keep it inside anymore!"

"And Satsuki," Ryuko continued, "just sat there and listened. Didn't say anything. Didn't react. Just listened."

"Which made Nonon even more nervous!" Mako interjected. "So she kept talking! She brought up the race in the garden when they were eight!"

"She did?" Isamu-san asked.

"She did! She told Satsuki that she fell in love with her that day because Satsuki was the first person who ever challenged her and treated her like an equal. And then she said—" Mako's voice got softer, more serious, "—she said that Satsuki had been the most important person in her life for fifteen years, and even if nothing changed, she needed her to know that."

"And what did Satsuki say?" Isamu-san leaned forward, invested now.

Ryuko and Mako exchanged a look.

"That's the thing," Ryuko said. "She didn't say anything. Not right away. She just asked Nonon to give her time to think about it."

"How much time?"

"She didn't specify," Ryuko said. "Which is where the problem started. Nonon immediately spiraled, thinking 'time to think' meant 'trying to figure out how to let me down easy,' and then she ran out of the estate—"

"Literally ran!" Mako added. "Like, took off running down the driveway!"

"—and Satsuki just sat there, processing. By the time we all arrived, she'd been sitting there for like forty-five minutes, not moving, barely blinking. It was creepy."

"She was overwhelmed!" Mako said. "I've never seen Satsuki-sama overwhelmed before! It was like watching a computer try to process too much information at once!"

"What happened next?" Isamu-san asked.

"Well," Ryuko said, "we tried to talk to her, but she kept saying she needed to 'analyze the situation' and 'consider all variables' and 'assess the potential outcomes of various responses.'"

"She's taking it way too seriously!" Mako groaned. "I tried to tell her—love isn't something you analyze! It's something you feel! But she just kept making these lists in her head about pros and cons!"

"To be fair," Ryuko said, "Satsuki's never been good with emotions. She's spent most of her life suppressing them or weaponizing them. Someone confessing their love to her probably broke her brain a little."

"Does she feel the same way?" Isamu-san asked. "About Nonon?"

Ryuko and Mako looked at each other again.

"Honestly?" Ryuko said. "I think so. I mean, I've seen the way she looks at Nonon when she thinks no one's watching. And she keeps all of Nonon's old concert programs in a box in her room—I saw it once when I was helping her move some stuff. She's kept every single one, even from when they were kids."

"That's so romantic!" Mako swooned. "She keeps them because she treasures every memory!"

"But she won't just say it," Ryuko continued. "Because that would require being vulnerable, and Satsuki Kiryuin doesn't do vulnerable."

"We need to help her!" Mako declared. "We need to show her that it's okay to be vulnerable! That love isn't something to be afraid of!"

"I don't think we should interfere," Ryuko said carefully. "This is between them."

"But they need help! They're both suffering!"

"They're both idiots," Ryuko corrected. "But they're idiots who need to figure this out themselves. If we push too hard, Satsuki's just going to shut down completely."

Mako pouted. "I guess you're right. But it's so hard watching them be so close to happiness and not grabbing it!"

"Trust me, I know," Ryuko said, taking another bite of ramen. "But they'll get there. Eventually. Probably. Hopefully."

"How is Nonon doing?" Isamu-san asked.

"Not great," Ryuko admitted. "She's been holed up in her apartment since friday night. Won't answer calls. Only responds to texts with single words. Uzu tried to visit her yesterday and she wouldn't open the door."

"Poor Nonon," Mako said sadly. "She was so brave! She did the scary thing! And now she's suffering because Satsuki-sama can't just say how she feels!"

"Give them time," Isamu-san said gently. "Sometimes the most important conversations happen slowly. Not everyone can be as open with their feelings as you are, Mankanshoku-san."

"I know," Mako sighed. "But I just want everyone to be as happy as I am!"

She leaned her head on Ryuko's shoulder, and Ryuko immediately adjusted to make her more comfortable, pressing a kiss to the top of her head without seeming to think about it.

"You two seem very happy," Isamu-san observed.

"We are," Ryuko said simply. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder or whatever, but honestly? I'm good with never being apart from her for that long again. Two months was torture."

"It was awful!" Mako agreed. "I cried at least once a week! Ask Isamu-san!"

"She did," Isamu-san confirmed. "Very punctually."

Ryuko laughed, a genuine, warm sound. "Did she tell you everything? Should I be embarrassed?"

"She spoke very fondly of you," Isamu-san said. "It was clear how much she loves you, and how much she missed you. You're a lucky woman, Ryuko-san."

"Don't I know it," Ryuko said, squeezing Mako's hand. "Trust me, every day I wake up and wonder what I did to deserve this girl."

"You existed!" Mako said cheerfully. "That's all you had to do! Just be yourself! And I fell in love with yourself!"

"That doesn't make grammatical sense."

"It makes emotional sense though!"

They finished their ramen, and when the check came, Ryuko immediately grabbed it. "This one's on me. As a thank you for putting up with Mako's weekly emotional processing sessions."

"They weren't sessions!" Mako protested. "They were visits! With talking! And feelings!"

"Same thing," Ryuko teased, pulling out her wallet.

As they prepared to leave, Mako turned to Isamu-san with shining eyes. "Thank you for listening to me all those weeks. I know I probably talked too much, and I definitely cried too much, but it really helped having someone to talk to. Someone who understood."

"It was my pleasure," Isamu-san said sincerely. "Though I hope I won't be seeing you here every friday alone anymore."

"Nope!" Mako said, linking her arm through Ryuko's. "From now on, we come together! Right, Ryuko-chan?"

"Yeah," Ryuko said, and though her tone was casual, her expression was soft. "Together."

"Will you let me know?" Isamu-san called as they headed for the door. "About Nonon and Satsuki? I find myself invested in their story now."

"Of course!" Mako promised. "I'll keep you updated! Oh, and if they ever figure things out, I'm bringing them both here too! We can have a celebration! A love celebration!"

"I look forward to it," Isamu-san said.

As they left, the bell chiming behind them, he watched through the window as they walked down the street. Ryuko said something that made Mako laugh, throwing her head back with joy. Then Mako jumped up to kiss her cheek, and Ryuko caught her around the waist, pulling her close.

Yes, Isamu-san thought with a smile. Those two were going to be just fine.

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